

White man's dreaming - the NT intervention

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My reference will be from the Arnhem communities of the NT

Our Australia movies tell us much about how we see ourselves in the world. Baz Luhrmann through the film 'Australia' imagines an Australia of cattle barons, stolen children, war, beautiful landscape and outback romance - stuff that causes us to escape into heroic achievement and nostalgia of the past. This is a film that promotes the spirit of the bush and Australian spirit to us and to the world. Yes, but.... it doesn't dwell too long in history, particularly the history that leads into the 1930's and the era of intervention of missions and government. The top and tailing of the film around the stolen generation and the reference to Drover's boy (the Aboriginal women who rode the horses) skims the stone across painful waters that shape the North. For the North has had over 100 years of Intervention.

We know that the Bishop of Carpentaria on hearing of the organised killings of Aboriginal people in the Territory invited CMS to send missionaries to the Gulf country and establish a sanctuary. From Dr John Harris' book "We'd wish we done more" ; "Gangs of ten to fourteen men were employed to hunt out all Aboriginal inhabitants and shoot them on sight. A leader of one of these gangs, George Conway, was still alive in 1957 when Fred Bauer interviewed him in Mataranka. Conway described how he had been hired to lead hunting expeditions to Arnhem Land in 1905 Or 1906. He said that his party alone had killed dozens of Aborigines." P2.. "At the Church of England's Australian Church Congress in Melbourne in 1906, George Horsfall Frodsham, Bp of North Queensland, was most outspoken;

'We have an airy way of speaking about Australia being a white man's country. But Australia first of all was a black man's country and I have never heard that a black man invited us to take his property away from him... a previous speaker at this Congress has said that the British were put by God into Australia to preach the gospel to the heathen. I have never heard a more complete condemnation of the stewardship of the Australian people. We have developed the country and we have civilised it, but we have certainly done very little to preach the gospel to the people we have dispossessed. The blacks have been shot and poisoned while they were wild and dangerous. They are now left to kill themselves with white vices where they have been 'tamed'... but very few have received at our hands either justice or consideration.'

Rex Joynt one of these first missionaries reported; "(Aborigines) are treated worse than animals, and sometimes even referred to as 'black animals'.. In the years gone by the

natives have been shot down like game and hundreds killed in a spirit of revenge. I have met men that boast of shooting the poor unprotected black 'just for fun'." (p10) John Harris goes on to say; "There are those who criticise CMS for thinking about Aborigines as a dying race needing protection. Perhaps CMS held this view far too long, but in 1908 in the valley of the Roper River, that is exactly what they needed." (p11).

I do not want this address to be a history lesson but I do want to remind people that there is a history with changing policies that have given birth to the situation that Aboriginal communities find themselves. The church along with other agencies and government must remember the past and seek to find genuine partnerships for a better future. Given the history of violence and removal of children it is amazing the Aboriginal people are able to welcome outsiders. The history of protection policy, then assimilation policy including the separation of children and recent decades of self-determination by various levels of government authorities and now Federal Government Intervention has meant a shifting ground and leaves Aboriginal people anxious and perplexed.

The stereo type in the film of sickly missionaries taking children away to nearby islands completely fulfils the ignorance of white men who dream of far away places and remedies that remove religion from Aboriginal people and impose our secular will upon spiritual people. Such is this 'dreaming' that it seems much better that Aboriginal people be brought into our world, our language our culture by government policy through the suspension of rights.

At the same time Australian industry promotes Aboriginal faces in the international market of tourism. We hold up the unique gifting of Indigenous Australia and yet we want to make them more like us. We want them to be employed in remote country. We want them to aspire to the lifestyle of our country. We want them to be shaped by a national dream where they are included. Yet we suspend their rights, stereo type their communities, impose controls that we in southern Australia would be outraged by and have not provided the necessary people or resources to assist Indigenous communities. The white man's 'dream' leaves little room for identity or territory and cannot comprehend spirituality in Aboriginal first languages which may make different choices of lifestyle, priorities and place that doesn't have an 'ocean view' or pay off a impossible house loan.

The absence of spiritual language or discernment by government or political figures while casting a secular dream across Indigenous people is another form of paternalism. This remains the Intervention's stumbling block as it intends good but does not engage people in ways that that will both galvanise and sustain healthy change among the people in its sight.

Rev Dr Djiniyini Gondarra OAM 1985 at the Uniting Church Northern Australia Synod;

"To me as a black theologian God is black as much as he is white. Why? Because he speaks our language, he knows our culture. He made this land we now live in and enjoy. If I am to have my true identity before God you cannot look at me in your ways. You must give me freedom to be me...We no longer see him as the white man's God or the God missionaries brought to us. But he is our God who has lived with us in history."

As our own western approaches and processes often lack an integration between our spirituality and our lifestyle decisions, so our policy and practice exclude or marginalise the central shaping relationships in Aboriginal communities – that of belief and kinship. And this inevitably leads to the oppression of distinctive peoples within a dominant culture and the suspension of human rights.

In the roll-out of the Intervention in Santa Teresa a community of 540 people 69 km SE of Alice Springs, government officials unilaterally took over the well established Women's Spirituality Centre "for mental health workers and their occasional visits" the coordinator was told. The paintings, cultural items and other contents had to be removed to make way for the Intervention's use of the building including a room used by one of the women for her traditional healing.

The woman who ran the Spirituality Centre was called to the Job Shop for her review of employment. She had been paid under CDEP. She was told she would now have to get "a proper job", which was to pick up papers in the community for which she was given a yellow T-shirt and boots. I understand the school stepped in because of her standing in the community and the humiliation put on her and gave her work at the school so that she would not have to do "the proper job".

Let us step back to where this dreaming began with the report on the front page of The Age 26 June 2007;

"The nightmare of violence, abuse and neglect engulfing remote indigenous settlements is Australia's own hurricane Katrina – an emergency that demands urgent action, not more consultation, Prime minister John Howard has declared...Mr Howard said the extremity of the situation demanded a 'highly prescriptive' initial response."

With such unimpeachable good intentions and explicit acts of government to rescue children and women from violence, the Anglican Synod of the NT, two days after the announcement of the Intervention, communicated to government that it welcomed their help but cautioned the government to not undermine the leadership, progress and respect of Indigenous people particularly the many who are outstanding examples of faithful leadership under stress. But what was embarked upon has not reflected principles of genuine partnership or respect. We could understand the breach of respect in Indigenous communities by thinking through our own home spaces. If we want to renovate our homes we contract tradespeople to repair walls, fix plumbing, give assistance to making our homes better, but in such partnerships we don't expect the family china to be smashed and the front door left unlocked for anyone.

How different to the request of Sir Doug Nicholls in the lead up to the 1967 Referendum for Aboriginal people when he gave three reasons for the nation to say yes in the recognition of Aboriginal people – firstly that we are all of 'one blood', that we are all members of the British Empire and that Aboriginal people want to walk along with you (Australia).

'White Australia Dreaming' was not a walking with Aboriginal people. It had many people imagining a Solomon Is style intervention which identified and quarantined the abusers from communities and sort to establish law and order. However in the NT, such dreaming

suspended human rights of a particular Australian group who were now stereo typed as abusers and unable to care for children. The one size fits all military approach diminished and shamed many that are proud to see their children go to school, which provided food on the table and were now treated as if they were not citizens under one law. No recognised indigenous leaders or group have opposed the need for more policing or better services in the NT – these gaping needs have been the subject of many reports for decades. The timing of the Intervention however, fell under the shadow of an approaching national election and could not help but be seen with mixed motives and agenda. Nationally church leaders and faith based organisations challenged the process and questioned the whether the outcomes expressed were going to be realised because it took back responsibilities from communities (The Age 27 June 2007).

Delivering the annual Eric Johnston Lecture at Parliament House in Darwin in November 2008 (18 months after the Intervention), Aboriginal and Torres St Is Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma said it was possible to meet human rights obligations while maintaining some form of income quarantining, but it required a careful targeted approach that was based on full engagement and tailored to the specific needs of communities. He said however that such a targeted approach was different to compulsory income management on the basis of race that now exists. “When you go to the local shop and there is a separate line for Aboriginal people to purchase their products, because of the store cards they are required to use, this is a human rights issue. And if you consider that forms of compulsory welfare quarantining could be applied to you in the future – whether you’re a pensioner, a single mother or unemployed – then this is a human rights issue. (Justice Trends Dec 08)

This treatment is so familiar to Aboriginal communities. Richard Trudgen in his book “Why Warriors lay down and die” describes the failure of government policies introduced in the 1970’s as “self determination”. He writes that under these policies the Yolngu people actually lost control of their situation. The result was that many Yolngu people have given up. The warriors are lying down and dying. They have lost confidence in their own cultural heritage. They hear the blame of officials who say, “They must learn English and join the real world, and take responsibility for themselves.” But Trudgen argues that these patterns of blame only destroy people’s self-confidence, ignoring the fact that structures put in place by white authorities are the major cause of the problem.

The primary cause says Trudgen, is “an almost total loss of control over their lives and living environment” (p. 218). This loss of control is related to a loss of optimism, loss of self-esteem, heightened levels of anger and hostility. It is accompanied by increased chronic and acute stress in daily life arising from racism and a lack of control over decision making and resources.

Ironically, he says, the policies of self-determination, self-management, self-reliance and self-sufficiency have failed to put control in the hands of the people. Structures and programmes have been developed to deal with specific problems, but so many of these have failed because they have been seen as outside answers, often culturally inappropriate, often dependent on external resources.

Patrick Dodson delivered the 2008 Sydney Peace Prize lecture describes an alternative to Intervention-style engagement;

“We have the policy of ‘Closing the Gap’ espoused by the current government with a Australian covenant emphasising the need for jobs for Aboriginal people... In executing such initiatives it is equally essential that the inherent Aboriginal social and cultural values of Indigenous society should not be sacrificed. The act of balancing both these imperatives is required.’ He said the relationship to date between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians has been ‘dramatically and fatally flawed...A new relationship between our societies must be constructed through negotiation and dialogue. There is a need for an Australian dialogue to enhance and build on [the Rudd] government’s good intentions towards healing and establishing dignity for the total Australian nation.”

Some months early in Reconciliation Week, Professor Lowitja O’Donoghue Tuesday 27th May 2008 St Peter’s Anglican Cathedral, Adelaide made the important connection between values, belief, apology and action;

“Reconciliation celebrates our intentions to connect and reconnect in ways that honour our understanding of human equality and worth. For me, this is the most simple and yet most profound message of Christianity. And I am at a time of my life where I reflect a lot. I reflect about what holding this belief means for daily living and action. I reflect about the consequences when this belief is abandoned. And of course it has been abandoned in the treatment of Aboriginal people.... Rudd’s Apology speech was magnificent. He got it so right.And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry. A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again. A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity. A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed. A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility. A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia.

What was so good about it was that he achieved that perfect balance between apologising for past wrongs and looking forward to a future built on healing and mutual respect.”

When we dismiss the religious worldview in which we live and do not understand the hidden values and beliefs that shape communities we unintentionally diminish them.

Let me make reference to this in Numbulwar in Arnhemland in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

12 Nov 2007. ABC News reported that the Federal Government's Northern Territory intervention task force is investigating claims one of its contractors built a pit toilet on a culturally important site. Task force head Major General David Chalmers says the toilet was built at Numbulwar, nearly 600 kilometres south-east of Darwin. He says it is not the way contractors would be expected to deal with cultural sensitivities in Indigenous communities.

"I'm appalled if that sort of thing happens, I'm always appalled if people don't act appropriately, don't act sensitively, don't respect the people that we're working with," he said. "Occasionally thoughtless individuals are going to do thoughtless things."

Notice how this is named as 'cultural sensitivities' not an offence against spiritual or religious ceremony or practice. I visited Numbulwar in March 2008 and met the Government Manager who was in her first few days of settling in. She was very worried about how she was going to be treated because of the desecration and knew that I was in this community for Confirmation on Sunday. She said she would be attending. I said to her that I would mention it to one of the ordained indigenous leaders.

After the service I said to Rev'd Yulki that the new manager was worried about the toilet being built on the land. She said "I'll tell her not to worry, that business has nothing to do with those men it is a women's business place and I am responsible for that ceremony. She's not to worry."

This story tells me that we know very little as outsiders to the ceremonial places, practices and leadership. Nor do we understand how this shapes decisions and how Christian leaders continue to exercise their authority in and outside the church in this community. When government people consult they often do not consider the local indigenous church leaders as important to meet nor do they consider the religious world. The Government Manager at Numbulwar as in other centres in East Arnhemland recognise church as a place for building community and addressing local problems but sadly there are many others that are either 'ignorant or arrogant' as recently written of them by the Catholic Bishop Eugene Hurley of Darwin in his letter to the Hon Jenny Macklin.

And what about the church, its intervention through missions and its relationship in Indigenous remote communities today?

In the wake of the Intervention in remote communities, at least one indigenous leader, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, has said that they were better off under mission rule. Abuse was low, they felt protected. (*The Age*, Melbourne, March 27 2008, page 1). What is hard for government to hear is the failure of the relationship between government and Indigenous people and particularly when older leaders know and express a longing for 'mission' days. Their longing is not for being led by white men but for stability, safety and for people who were their friends. This is not to white wash the culture denying actions of missionaries or their participation in the governments' policy of removal of children. However the call for the old days of missionaries names the need for relationships with non- Indigenous people that offer friendship and the sharing of spiritual matters that are central to a community.

Dr Murray Seiffert *Refuge on the Roper*, 2008 ACORN, p138-139;

"If we compare the work of the missionaries (at Roper) with the attitudes of the day, the missionaries stand out for their commitment to Aboriginal people, and they continue to be appreciated by most residents of the district. As (NT indigenous leader) Gerry Blitner used to say to people who criticised the missionaries: 'What was your mob doing when they were

out living the hard life with us?' Plenty of anthropologists were still measuring skulls, whilst others were theorizing from comfortable offices....One common criticism of missionary work is that it sought to change traditions and the way that Aborigines viewed the world. There is certainly some truth in this. However, a century of Christianity on the Roper River has not killed Aboriginal culture. Indeed, if one compares the retention of Aboriginal culture at Christian missions than of other areas, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the missions were significant in preserving Aboriginal culture. "

From notes of Dr Murray Seiffert;

'Resistance to government workers emerged early in the hand-over of missions to government. At Ngukurr, far from seeing the 'self-determination' changes of the 1970s as bringing a longed-for freedom, there was a meeting where the locals condemned the government for not giving CMS enough money to do its job there! 'Why don't they fund CMS properly and stay out of it!' they asked. They would have recognized the growing independence under CMS and trusted it to finish the job.

Aboriginal people on these missions were not resisting new ways of doing things, they were resisting a new and unknown group of whitefellas coming in to take over. The track record of white workers going to work in remote communities is very mixed, littered with former workers who were incompetent, immoral, dishonest and disrespectful. Of course there have been some very good government workers, but few are remembered.

It is commonplace to hear European Australians set Aboriginal spirituality in opposition to the Christian faith. Some Aborigines see it that way, but a large majority do not. For them, they are part of the same domain.'

Indigenous pastor Revd Harry Walker of Bundjalung people, Tabulam NSW from an address delivered at Christ through Culture Conference Ballina February 2009;

"When Aboriginal people lose appreciation of the sacred they lose appreciation for the sacredness of life..... The Creator God is out there where the people struggle – for dignity, freedom, and liberation. The Creator is out there with the people in their struggle, in the same way God was with the Israelites who were in slavery in Egypt...That is where God really is – out with the people, out with the struggle with the Pharaohs of today."

'The Indigenous spiritual world view is 'wholistic' thinking, without the boundaries which characterise most educated Western minds. The way people relate to each other is determined by the kinship system, including the exchange of goods and services. It seems that a century of Christian involvement in Arnhem Land has had little influence on the kinship system; many of the ways people relate to one another remain unchanged.

The Intervention has the clear aim of changing the ways that people relate to each other. Some would want to argue that this is necessary if Aborigines are to achieve the living standards of Australians of European origin. Or perhaps they are saying that a materialistic philosophy is a requirement for improved material circumstances. Many people, including most politicians, are ready to argue that in this case, the end justifies the means. The point

is that such a position is not simply a matter of political preference, or choice of economic theory. It is a decision to impose a new approach to kinship relationships, a change of religious commitment.

One of the great risks of the Intervention is that it may make things worse. The greatest dangers appear to be the changes that affect the human spirit.'

The 'White Australia dreaming' found in the Intervention believes English is solely the medium of delivering progress. Such a position undermining the many Indigenous languages in public education is an assault on culture, identity and belief.

From Dr John Harris article in 'One Land, One Saviour'; "For Aboriginal people, being multilingual, different languages have different purposes. All people have a deep language in which they think about spiritual things, usually their so-called 'mother tongue' or the 'language of their hearts'. English is still for indigenous Australians the language of oppression, the language of the conqueror. People will desire it because it is the language of power but for multilingual Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land, English is not the language in which they relate to God, nor is not the language of those matters of life and culture..."

The current phase of the Intervention uses the language of 'Social Inclusion' and the priorities of English over vernacular in order to achieve economic and social improvements. This position leads to a distorted model of education with people whose first language is not English. The demand for English over the vernacular is not evidenced-based but reflects decades of poor resourcing of non-Indigenous teachers with Indigenous language skills and resources and the inability to resource Indigenous teacher training. It further compounds the gap in communication, respect and relationship between government and Indigenous people.

Future action for churches and people of faith;

The Christian churches have played a significant role in engaging government and business and society about the concerns of Indigenous people. For example Professor Henry Reynolds sees members of the Church Missionary Society of the early nineteenth century as founders of the land rights movement. H Reynolds *The Law of the Land*, 2nd Ed, Penguin 1992 p97.

Churches have in the main let the Intervention slide from centre stage and are prepared to wait and see what the Rudd government will do. Archbishop Peter Jensen described the situation before the Federal election in 2007 as the greatest moral question facing our nation. And there is every indication at present that churches are not being heard when significant policies and practices of government are being delivered in the NT which marginalise the spiritual in decision making and diminish human rights. It is now time for the churches to move from the occasional reactive response to the Intervention, towards careful analysis and develop a sustained advocacy to bring to the attention of government and society the living issues of Indigenous people. At present churches have a range of Aboriginal networks which they consult but notably they are poorly resourced. The situation requires a concerted effort to bring Indigenous leaders alongside denominational church

leaders and caring agencies into dialogue in order for a sustained analysis effort to address the failures of Intervention and focus where models of genuine partnership can deliver better health, education and housing. There are many church based agencies that deliver care, education and health into remote communities. Their challenges and experience need to inform our approaches. Partnerships already exist on the ground which have improved the well being of Indigenous people and strengthened relationships – these need to be heard and supported.

The wider church ought listen to the living Indigenous Church's story both in the NT and across the nation. Dr John Harris from an Introduction of 'One Land, One Saviour';

The role of Aboriginal Christian women has been pivotal. In communities like Umbakumba, the church only survives at all because of the faithful ministry of a handful of remarkable women whose wisdom and devotion and patience in suffering is an example to us all. After waiting vainly for decades a man to be raised up, two women, Mabuda and Colleen Mamarika were recognised by ordination in 2006. In less than 2 years Mabuda was dead. Aboriginal women have confided to Joy Sandefur how the absence of men in the church is a constant grief to them. Deeply hurt, they long to find ways to bring the men back, and to nurture them to become leaders again. Young men are desperately needed but even for the few who are in the church, the ordained ministry is a daunting and unattractive option. ...Many in their community will see them as weak: part of what continues to be seen as the powerlessness of the church. They will preside with awful regularity at the funerals of their loved ones and expect that within a few years they too will be struck by a debilitating or fatal illness which the community and even the leaders themselves will see as an act of malice from evil powers invoked by a secret enemy. Despite all this they will constantly visit the sick, the dying and the grief-stricken. As people of prayer they will pray earnestly time and time again for healing. They will long to see others come to Christ and try always to reach out to them. They will try to run their parishes. They will do the best they can... They are all 'wounded healers'...

Judith Wright many years ago captured the cry of the land with her images of dust in times of crisis. It captures the resolve and imagination we need to have in addressing our relationship with Indigenous people that acknowledges and works with the spiritual realities of our brothers and sisters while bringing healing to the social pain in the communities.

"Dust has overtaken the dreams that were wider and richer than wheat under the sun, And war's eroding gale scatters our sons like a million other grains of dust. O sighing at the blistered door, darkening the evening sky, the dust accuses, Our dream was the wrong dream, our strength was the wrong strength, Weary as we are we must make a new choice, a choice more difficult than resignation."

Bishop Greg Thompson 14 Feb 2009